

“Holiness” as Strength: Further Ruminations

The Levitical legislation safeguarding “purity” and “holiness,” in this Parasha as well as others, can raise some major issues for the modern reader. A colleague of mine told me that I should be careful to discuss how I relate to some of those issues, rather than discussing what seems implied “objectively” in the text. I’m not sure discussing how I relate to the text won’t get me into more trouble, rather than less, conservative classicist that I am, with my distaste for what I consider to be “apologetics.” But I will venture a few comments, echoes of which the reader will have found scattered among my previous essays on Leviticus: If in previous years I have seen Levitical legislation as a “Health Department,” this year I have moved to seeing Levitical law as a “strength department.” The laws about priestly avoidance of mourning, priestly marriage, and the prohibition of disabled priests from serving, in Chapter 21 of our Parashah, are particularly fraught for modern Jews. There is little that I can say that will ease our sense of dissonance with much of this legislation. But what I’m even more convinced of is that the “holiness” which is the goal of Levitical law is to be identified with strength, at least a kind of strength. And I draw consolation that to the extent we moderns promote human and Jewish strength, we are engaged in imitatio dei, “imitation of God.” And imitatio dei, the command to imitate God in the “holiness” sense, is repeated many times in Leviticus. Over and over we are told to be holy or to observe some holiness law, because God Himself is holy. Indeed, one of my biggest questions about Maimonides’ Code and Rabbinic Law is why they chose to derive the commandment to imitate God from the much rarer Biblical phrase “and thou shall walk in His ways,” rather than the simpler, more obvious, and more prevalent “be holy for I the LORD am holy.” No doubt, this is part of Maimonides’ seeing “holiness” differently than I do. Maimonides sees God’s “holiness” as a kind of separateness and apartness, and elevation far above the things of This World. But I prefer to understand God’s “holiness” as His Strength, and attempt to inspire myself and others to lead a personal and Jewish life of strength as a way of dedicating ourselves to that goal.

Avoiding impurity is part of the way to safeguard strength. Another is to encourage youth and that which leads to new growth, as well as preserving youthful strength and energy. We should seek to model ourselves after the strong, and that is why the crippled and lame cannot serve as officiating priests. But the crippled priests may eat, nonetheless, of the priestly gifts. Part of the strength and glory of the strong, after all, in Jewish tradition, is the hero’s ability to protect, care for and save his weaker brethren. Still, strength requires proper models of encouragement, unblemished models of proper form. And youth and strength require special encouragement and protection. Young athletes require healthy, strong models to look up to, to see what they could be capable of. Models of beauty are important in encouraging the best of strength and health. The best of strength requires imitating ideals of strength and form. I may have many issues with many of the particulars of Levitical law. And, to be frank, I also have issues with glorification of strength, which can lead to immoral pagan-like thought, and the casting aside of the weak and frail. True strength is a balance of many elements. One cannot be so averse to impurity and contamination as to avoid normal exercise, for example. Ultimately a society’s strength depends upon its nurturing youth, and there are trade-offs which must be made to keep a thriving youth, But to be weak or even seen as weak is for Israel to profane God’s Name. By the same token, of course, I can say that to abandon our weak and destitute fellow and not come to his aid is weakness and cowardice, not true strength and heroism. We must strengthen ourselves as well as strengthen each other. The message I take from my reading of Leviticus is one which reverberates for many Jews today: “Be holy, for God Himself is holy,” translated as “Be strong, for God Himself is strong.”



CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL
The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue

Shabbat Emor

A Special Touro Synagogue-NYC Shabbaton

May 13-14, 2022 | 13 Iyar, 5782

SCHEDULE

Hertz: p. 513 | Haftarah: p. 528
Kaplan: p. 610 | Haftarah: p. 1172

Candle Lighting | 7:45 pm

Friday Evening Services | 7:00 pm

Special Friday Night Lights | Rabbi Soloveichik | following Services

Zemiroth | 8:15 am

Shahrit | 9:00 am

Youth Program | 10:00 am | Meet up in Fidanque Youth Room

Sanctuaries & Cities with Rabbi Soloveichik

“The Shofar of Moses Seixas and the Torah of Ezra Stiles:
Faith and Philosemitism at the Touro Synagogue”

Following morning services

Kiddush | in honor of our Touro Shabbaton | *See inside for the full list of sponsors*

Shabbat Afternoon Class | Rabbi Soloveichik | 7:00 pm

Shabbat Afternoon Services | 7:45 pm

Shabbat Ends | 8:45 pm

Welcome to our guests this week from the Touro Synagogue!

Weekday Service Times

Morning Services

Sunday: 8:05 am | Monday-Friday: 7:05 am

Evening Services

Sunday-Thursday (Minha/Arbit): 6:30 pm

THIS SHABBAT

Thank you to all who sponsored this week's special expanded Kiddush Luncheon in honor of the Touro Shabbaton:

The Solomon Family, in honor of our Touro Synagogue friends and affiliates

Juan Mesa-Freydell, in honor of the Chaverim of the Touro Synagogue

Karen & Jack Daar
Faith Fogelman

Aaron Ginsburg, in honor of the Touro Shabbaton
Suchu & Meyer Solny

Scotch Sponsors:

Jacobowitz Family, in memory of Saul Jacobowitz (Shaul Yechezkel b. Avraham Eliyahu HaKohen)

Juan Mesa-Freydell, in honor of the Chaverim of the Touro Synagogue

Yayin L'kiddush Sponsor:

Anonymous

2022 ANNUAL SPRING FUNDRAISER

Sanctuaries & Cities:

Synagogues of the World and the Stories They Tell

THIS Tuesday, May 17 | Virtual Only

"Love Poems of Halevi:

Treasures and Yearnings of the Ben Ezra Synagogue"

For the full schedule, lecture titles, and to sponsor or register, visit
shearithisrael.org/springfundraiser2022.

THIS SUNDAY

Sunday Matinee, Sponsored by the Sisterhood

THIS Sunday, May 15 | 4 pm | On Zoom with our guest, Dr. Jon Greenberg

"The Agricultural Roots of Jewish Faith From the Desert Shepherds to Israel Farmers: The Natural History of Torah"

Register at shearithisrael.shulcloud.com/form/sisterhood-sunday-matinee.

SHABUOT

Rabbi Soloveichik's Shabuot Lecture

Saturday Night, June 4 | 11:00 pm

Enjoy this annual public lecture — Come for the Torah; stay for the cheesecake!

Honor our Longtime Choirmaster, Leon Hyman

Day I of Shabuot, Sunday, June 5 | Tribute deadline: Tuesday, May 31

Help us celebrate Leon Hyman's 66 years of service to Shearith Israel.

See our emails for instructions on how to pay tribute to Maestro Hyman.

COMING UP

CSI Youth: Leading Up to Lag La'Omer

With Gabi & Raph

Wednesday night, May 18 | 6:00-8:00 pm

Register at shearithisrael.shulcloud.com/form/lag-laomer-5782 Presented by

Shearith Israel's Caring Connection

4th Annual Smash the Stigma

A Jewish Communal Conversation on Mental Illness & Suicide

IN PERSON, Monday, May 23 | 7:00 pm

These profoundly important *Smash the Stigma* events help raise awareness and facilitate conversation about difficult realities.

Register at shearithisrael.org/smash-the-stigma2022.

The New Amsterdam History Center & Congregation Shearith Israel invite you to

Music of Many Worlds

Sephardic Vocal Music of 18th-century Amsterdam

Sunday, May 22 | 4:00 pm | In person at Shearith Israel

Visit shearithisrael.org/music-many-worlds to register.

Shearith Israel & the Marlene Meyerson JCC Manhattan present:

Upheaval: The Journey of Menachem Begin

with introductory remarks by Rabbi Soloveichik

Wed, June 8 | 7 pm | 334 Amsterdam Ave, Marlene Meyerson JCC Manhattan

In memory of Ambassador Yehuda Avner, whose opus, The Prime Ministers, inspired the production

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Hazaka u'Berukha to **Joelle Wallach**, on her upcoming concerts on May 19 & 22.

For the full details, visit Joelle's website, joellewallach.com.
